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NEA/ARP AMACDONALD AND INR SMOFFAT

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TAGS: [MCAP](#) [MOPS](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [YM](#)
SUBJECT: SA,ADA WAR: DESPITE CLAIMS OF CEASEFIRE, CIVILIANS
SUFFER, NO END TO THE FIGHTING IN SIGHT

REF: A. A. SANAA 1532
[1](#)B. B. SANAA 1555

[1](#)1. (S/NF) SUMMARY. On the afternoon of August 26, multiple media sources reported a brief humanitarian ceasefire between the ROYG and the Houthis. The ROYG did not officially confirm it, and it is unclear how it is being implemented or if it will hold. The reported ceasefire comes at the end of a week during which aerial bombings, shellings, and house-to-house combat continued in strategic locations in Sa'ada and Amran governorates in northern Yemen. Both the Houthis and the ROYG claimed important victories; these could not be independently confirmed. The ROYG's backtracking on its claim of victory in Harf Sufyan, its puzzling silence with respect to the ROYG's alleged seizure of Houthi caches of Iranian-origin weapons, and its failure to produce evidence in support of either, lead most observers to believe it falsified these claims in an attempt to turn the tide of public and international opinion on the war. The humanitarian situation continues to worsen, with relief agencies planning for as many as 150,000 internally displaced. Increasing "tribalization" of the conflict on a national level bodes ill for an eventual cessation to the hostilities. The ROYG's mismanagement of the war) through heavy collateral damage, clumsy efforts to shape media coverage in its favor, and manipulative attempts to rally powerful tribes and Western nations behind it) are elements of a miscalculated strategy that, not surprisingly, appears to be backfiring. END SUMMARY.

FIGHTING CONTINUES; ROYG AND HOUTHIS SQUABBLE OVER CONDITIONS

[1](#)2. (S/NF) Aerial bombings, shellings, and hand-to-hand combat continue in strategic locations in Sa'ada and Amran governorates in northern Yemen. The exact casualty toll is difficult to estimate. Reuters reports hundreds killed and wounded since the sixth war began on August 11, and relief agencies believe up to 150,000 people have been displaced by the fighting. In the past week, both the Houthis and the ROYG claimed important victories, yet these could not be independently confirmed. In an August 20 interview with Al-Jazeera, a Houthi spokesman said that the "false victories that the government has proudly announced(are media victories only." This claim seems to be confirmed by NGA satellite imagery, which details the army's withdrawal from ROYG-controlled deployment positions. The ROYG lost its bases near Dahyan and Malaheet. With the pullback of forces to Sa'ada City and fighting in its outskirts, NGA assesses that the "Yemeni government is not doing well against the Houthis." The ROYG seems to be defending its most critical bases in Sa'ada City, along the Sa'ada-Sanaa Highway, and Manzilah, a base on the Saudi border. (Note: Late afternoon on August 26, there were reports of a temporary, verbal ceasefire to allow humanitarian aid to reach conflict

affected persons, but fighting still occurred in certain areas. These reports were corroborated by multiple independent media outlets, but the government had not released an official statement. Post has no further information on the reported ceasefire's implementation or duration. End Note.)

¶3. (C) The Houthis continue to reject the six conditions for a ceasefire offered by the Supreme Security Committee at the sixth war's outset (reftel a). The Houthis' official spokesman reiterated their rejection of the six conditions and their commitment to the Doha Agreement. President Saleh, in his August 21 Ramadan address, insisted that the Houthis immediately accept the six conditions. That same day, sermons at Friday prayers repeated the government line that the Houthis are responsible for shedding the blood of innocent civilians, blocking roads, disturbing public peace, kidnapping and terrorizing civilians, and destroying public and private property. (Note: Terms of the Doha Agreement, signed by the ROYG and the Houthis in February 2008, include a halt to all military operations, the release of all prisoners within a month, exile to Qatar of two rebel leaders, and the establishment of reconstruction and compensation committees. Most observers note that little, if any, reconstruction took place in Sa'ada. Foreign Minister al-Qirbi was unable to offer any specific examples at an August 20 meeting with Ambassadors. End Note.)

BOTH SIDES CLAIM VICTORY IN HARF SUFYAN

¶4. (SBU) One of the most important battlegrounds is just
SANAA 00001599 002 OF 004

south of Sa'ada governorate in Harf Sufyan (Amran governorate). On August 21, multiple media sources reported that the Houthis claimed to have captured the district, seizing 80 soldiers and assorted military equipment. Two days later, Al-Jazeera quoted local authorities saying that "the army forces were able...to seize full control of the area of Harf Sufyan after the killing of 100 Houthis, whose bodies were found on the roadsides outside the city of Al-Harf, including two of the most important commanders." Mareb Press also reported that 100 "decomposed" bodies of rebels killed in military strikes in different areas of Harf Sufyan had been discovered by the military. (Note: These and other media outlets apparently received a faxed statement from government officials claiming that the 100 dead were Houthis. This claim was not published in the official media. End Note.) On August 24, however, official media denied that government forces had killed 100 Houthis, saying that no bodies were found during patrols of Harf Sufyan.

¶5. (C) Murad Zafir, Deputy Director of the National Democratic Institute (NDI), surmises that the ROYG thought it could win an easy public relations victory by claiming the 100 dead were Houthis, including two important leaders. He told PolOff on August 25 that he believes the ROYG also thought it could cover up the killing of innocent civilians. He said that the MOD "tried to sweep up the dirt and put it under the carpet. But it was obvious that (the 100 dead) were innocent civilians, so the government later denied it happened, retreating from what they had earlier said."

IRANIAN ARMS) NO SMOKING GUN

¶6. (C) Harf Sufyan is also reportedly the site of one or more Houthi weapons caches containing Iranian-made arms. The media reported on August 21 that the Yemeni military seized a total of six Houthi weapons caches, allegedly containing Iranian-made short-range missiles, shells, and light machine guns, in Harf Sufyan and two Sa'ada governorate districts. However, in an August 25 meeting with EmbOffs, MOD Chief of Staff Major General Ahmed al-Ashwal was reticent to discuss these claims. He said only that the military found a

"limited" quantity of Iranian-made weapons in Houthi possession, but that he could not state the quantity with any certainty. (Note: Despite failing to offer specific or credible evidence that the ROYG did indeed find Iranian weapons in the Houthis' possession, Ashwal did say that "the case is clear" that Iran is supporting the rebels, and evidence of this is the "false and fabricated information about the Houthi war on Iranian television." End Note.)

17. (C) According to some press reports, the Iranian weapons were burned or otherwise destroyed. Observers doubt this to be true. First, the ROYG would probably incorporate seized weapons into its own arsenal. Second, as Zafir told PolOff on August 25, "If the ROYG is dying to get international support for its war against the Houthis, and it finds tangible evidence of Iranian involvement, why wouldn't it take pictures? If they had this evidence in their hand, why would they throw it away?" Many observers point out that the Houthis do not need Iran's assistance in acquiring weapons. Instead, the Houthis easily obtain weapons from Yemen's thriving illegal arms market or from soldiers in retreat. Mohammed Azzan, presidential advisor for Sa'ada affairs and a founding member of the Believing Youth, told PolOff on August 16 that "I personally am sure there are no weapons coming from the outside." He said that the Houthis very easily obtain weapons when they capture military camps or rout soldiers in battle. He added, "The military covers up its failure by saying the Houthis' weapons are coming from Iran."

HUMANITARIAN SUFFERING, COLLATERAL DAMAGE

18. (U) The conflict has displaced thousands more in recent days, bringing the total number of IDPs to approximately 100,000, according to the World Food Program (WFP). (Note: This estimate has risen by about 5,000 persons since the August 19 donor briefing (reftel b). End Note.) Many of the new IDPs fled Malaheet to Haradh after Houthis took control of the area. The WFP is planning to serve as many as 150,000 IDPs, and requires additional donor support to meet this increased commitment. An August 25 operational report by ICRC stated, "As people keep pouring into Sa'ada City, the capacities of existing camps for displaced people(are being stretched to the limit." Relief agencies' ability to access

SANAA 00001599 003 OF 004

IDPs is limited. Hassan Zayd, Secretary General of al-Haq Party and Chairman of the Joint Meeting Parties (JMP), told PolOff on August 26 that mobile phone coverage in Sa'ada is sporadic, and he has received calls from many people throughout the governorate who have not eaten in four days. He said that fuel costs have risen dramatically, to two to three times the prices in Sana'a. WFP reports that human smuggling has begun, and people are paying about \$25 per person to be smuggled out of Sa'ada City, a dangerous venture given the nearby fighting. Capacities of IDP camps in Sa'ada City were further stretched because approximately 5,000 IDPs were relocated from Al-Anad camp after it was caught in the line of fire. According to WFP, "what was previously Al-Anad camp is now a battleground; no IDPs remain." The government accused the Houthis of breaking into the camp in order to plunder food and medical supplies, while AFP reported that the army stormed the Al-Anad camp, forcing IDPs to leave and seizing humanitarian aid. Three USAID-supported mobile health teams are stuck in Sa'ada City, unable to reach outlying populations because of security concerns; the USAID agricultural extension office in Sa'ada City was taken over by Houthis, and the agent who lived there was forced to flee.

19. (C) In Harf Sufyan, local authorities ordered residents to evacuate, and the WFP reports that as many as 52,500 people were displaced. Relief groups estimate that an additional 17,150 people were still in Harf Sufyan as of August 23, unable to flee due to the ongoing military

campaign. Ashwal, however, denied that civilians were in the area during the "house to house" combat between the ROYG armed forces and Houthi fighters. A USAID-supported emergency obstetric unit -- which was hit during the Fifth War but had managed to rebuild and resume operations -- was forced to halt activities after the Sixth War began.

¶10. (S/NF) Collateral damage to civilian structures is probably very high given the way the ROYG is prosecuting the war. The ROYG's reconnaissance runs are conducted during the day, while its actual bombing runs are conducted at night, yet it has older, limited night-vision equipment and no known "smart bombs." As a result, according to DAO analysis, the ROYG's night-bombing is likely to be inaccurate, resulting in significant collateral damage to the civilian population. With respect to Houthi allegations of the use of white phosphorus by the ROYG (reftel a), DAO reports that Russia has not sold white phosphorus to Yemen, though the ROYG may have obtained it from another supplier, perhaps in Eastern Europe.

TRUUBLING TRIBALIZATION

¶11. (U) The Sa'ada conflict is increasingly "tribalized." This is both a consequence of the ROYG's prosecution of the war) the use of "jets, artillery, and bombs caused lots of killings of tribal people, leading many tribes to gather around the Houthis," according to Zafir -- and the ROYG's deliberate attempt to rally prominent tribes behind its cause. The leader of the Hashid tribal confederation, Sheikh Sadiq bin Abdullah al-Ahmar, was quoted in the military publication 26 September as saying that the Hashid tribes stand by the armed forces to hunt down the Houthis. (Note: In contrast, Hamid al-Ahmar, Sadiq's more powerful brother, has explicitly blamed the ROYG for the hostilities in Sa'ada. End Note.) The head of the Bakil tribes, Sheikh Naji al-Shaif, denounced the Houthis' criminal acts and affirmed the Bakils' support for the ROYG's efforts to end the rebellion. (Note: According to Mareb Press, the Mareb and al-Jawf Tribal Alliance, a newly formed group of local tribal leaders, called on the ROYG to stop the war in Sa'ada and on the Houthis to commit to the legitimacy of the republican system. End Note.) Zafir was troubled by the ROYG's efforts to enlist the tribes in its fight against the Houthis. He acknowledged that the government has a legitimate right to exercise the use of force against the rebellion, but he cautioned that "trying to get tribes behind (the ROYG) will lead to an endless chain of blood feuds... The war will continue because the tribes are involved." He explained that the involvement of the tribes -- with their strong norms of vengeance -- will unleash an entirely new dynamic on an already complex and multi-layered conflict. If tribe members are killed during the war, he said, "Even if the Houthis are eradicated, there will be an endless chain of retaliation."

COMMENT

SANAA 00001599 004 OF 004

¶12. (C) The ROYG's mismanagement of the war -- through heavy collateral damage, clumsy efforts to shape media coverage in its favor, and manipulative attempts to rally powerful tribes and Western nations behind it -- are elements of a miscalculated strategy that, not surprisingly, appears to be backfiring. By inflicting collective punishment on civilians, while trying to pin the blame on the Houthis, the ROYG is creating more grievances and exacerbating the government's lack of credibility among citizens and the international community. Allegations that the Houthis are receiving aid and weapons from Iran appear to be the ROYG's latest disingenuous attempt to garner Western and Sunni Arab support by casting the Houthis as terrorists, religious extremists, and allied with a hostile power. Clearly the ROYG has learned nothing from the previous five rounds of

fighting. Its strategies have only made the conflict worse, and will prolong it rather than end it. While it is too soon to know if the August 26 reports of a temporary humanitarian ceasefire are true -- or if it will hold -- there is no doubt that the intensity of the fighting to date will make it more difficult for the two parties to come to a negotiated settlement. As long as the ROYG continues to fail to address the grievances underlying the conflict, any ceasefire will not stop the fighting for long. END COMMENT.
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